

Veterans' Report

Information for South Dakota Veterans

Summer 2004



Fighting for South Dakota's Veterans

Dear Friend:

This summer, our nation celebrated the dedication of the National World War II Memorial, honoring the 16 million veterans of World War II service, including more than 400,00 who made the ultimate sacrifice. These veterans, America's "greatest generation," selflessly answered the call to duty at a time when democracy around the world was in great peril.

Although the conflicts of today are different, our nation owes an equal measure of respect and support to the new generation of veterans returning home.

These newest veterans, along with the 4 million veterans who have enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health system over the past 8 years, represent a tremendous challenge to the VA. But they also represent a tremendous opportunity for us to do right by those who have defended America. Enrollment is growing to record levels, and the VA has struggled to adapt. Recent years have seen lengthy waiting lists for treatment and bans on enrollment for thousands of middle-income veterans. The President repeatedly has proposed higher fees for veterans to discourage them from using the VA at all.

We must work together to find a new way to meet the health care needs of America's veterans and end the efforts to keep veterans out of the care to which they are entitled. I believe the answer is mandatory funding, which is discussed at length later in this newsletter.

In recent months, I've had the opportunity to visit with veterans all across South Dakota, as I've attended the annual state conventions of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion, as well as Memorial Day services in the Aberdeen cemetery where my father is buried. The veterans I've spoken with are clear about the needs that the federal government needs to fill: better access to health care, improvements in the military's Survivor Benefit Plan, full concurrent receipt of disability and pension payments, affordable access to prescription medications, and the reversal of the President's Priority 8 enrollment ban.

I'm pleased to report that we've had some important victories on these issues in the Senate this year. We've passed legislation to correct the problems with the Survivor Benefit Plan. We've passed legislation to build on last year's concurrent receipt victory. And we've found good support for efforts to increase health care funding, including efforts to make veterans health care funding mandatory. Although there is still much work to do, I am encouraged that many of my colleagues recognize that supporting our veterans is not an option – it's an obligation.

As we work to address the needs of America's veterans, it is critical that I continue to hear from my fellow veterans about your needs, your concerns, and your suggestions for change. I hope you'll contact me so that I can continue to fight for the needs of South Dakota's veterans.



Senator Daschle, Mayor Jim Shaw, and representatives from the Rapid City Area Chamber of Commerce place a wreath at the South Dakota pillar at the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.

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Guaranteeing Health Care for Veterans

In September 2002, several South Dakota veterans visited me in the U.S. Capitol. They came with national leaders of veterans' organizations to which they belonged.

The veterans told me they were frustrated with the battle, year after year, to win adequate funding for veterans' health care. I understood completely, but didn't know what to say. Then they told me of their vision for a new approach to winning resources for veterans' health care – funding the VA the same way we fund Medicare and military pensions, through mandatory funding.

Under mandatory funding, laws are passed to put a program in place, but then funding is provided automatically. There are no annual appropriations bills and no annual political battles between Congress and the President.

I told those veterans their plan sounded appealing and offered my support if they could get all the major veterans organizations to agree on the details.

They lived up to their end of the bargain, forming the Partnership for Veterans Health Care Budget Reform. The Partnership includes the American Legion, the VFW, the Disabled American Veterans, and half a dozen other major organizations.

In April of this year, representatives of the Partnership visited me again, reminded me of my commitment, and asked for my help in bringing mandatory funding to the floor of the U.S. Senate for a vote. They had kept up their end of the bargain; I was going to keep up mine.



Senator Daschle receives the American Legion's Unsung Hero Award for his service to America's veterans.

Two months later, we catapulted mandatory funding out of committee, where it had been stuck, and brought it before the full U.S. Senate. The issue had received little public attention, but these efforts brought us coverage in major newspapers and broadcast news outlets. Veterans across the country sent letters and e-mails to their senators, and phoned in as well, in a major grassroots effort.

In the end, the vote on my proposal to establish full funding was 49- 48. Among those voting in favor were nearly every Democratic senator, the chairman and ranking member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, as well as leading senators on the Appropriations Committee. Unfortunately, due to a parliamentary maneuver by our opponents, the amendment required 60 votes, so it lost.

Many who spoke against mandatory funding defended the current funding system. These senators hailed 30-40 percent increases in VA funding during the Bush Administration. What they neglected to mention were two other key facts: that amount falls short of the growth in veterans who need VA care and also fails to meet health care inflation.

The time has come to change a broken funding system. We didn't get it done this year, but we're not giving up the fight. We should make a clear promise to America's veterans – if you wore the uniform, your health care needs will be met.

The Fight for Funding

“A disgrace and a sham.” That’s how VFW National Commander Edward Banas described President Bush’s Fiscal Year 2005 VA budget request.

National Commander Alan Bowers, of the Disabled American Veterans, said the budget request makes it “clear that veterans are not a national priority to this administration.”

The nation’s veterans are upset with President Bush’s 2005 VA budget, especially given the thousands of new veterans now returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. I share their concern.

Let me share some details about President Bush’s budget proposal. If his request is enacted, VA health care will receive an increase of \$507 million, or 1.9 percent. That’s not enough to account for inflation in health costs, which can be as high as 7 or 8 percent a year. In fact, it is based on the assumption that thousands of veterans will quit using the VA. That budget request is a far cry from the \$2.85 billion increase called for by the Independent Budget, which is published by leading veterans organizations. Even VA Secretary Anthony Principi – who reports to the President – testified in Congress that the White House had slashed \$1.2 billion from the level he felt was necessary.



Senator Daschle offers remarks at a ceremony honoring him with the George Washington Freedom Award, given by the Adjutant Generals Association of the United States for “outstanding contributions to national defense and the cause of freedom.”

The President’s budget also slashes funding for medical research, meaning the termination of as many as 150 research projects in areas like new technologies for prosthetic limbs, cancer prevention and treatment of mental illnesses. And, despite the fact that the claims backlog has increased by over 15 percent under President Bush, he proposed cutting 540 staff who review claims for benefits like disability and pension payments.

Finally, President Bush is proposing new ways to make veterans pay out of their own pockets for VA care. This year’s proposal would establish \$250 annual fees for Priority 7 and Priority 8 veterans and increase pharmaceutical copayments from \$7 to \$15 for these same veterans. Over the course of his four years in office, President Bush has proposed increasing fees charged to veterans by \$1.1 billion, or nearly 450 percent.

These proposals are wrong, especially at a time when we have men and women risking their lives in combat overseas. We’ve beaten back similar proposals in the past. We must respond to the thousands of new veterans enrolling in the VA system, not seek ways to drive them away.

To that end, my colleagues and I have been working to dramatically increase funding for veterans over the amount proposed by the President. As we considered the Fiscal Year 2005 budget resolution, I offered an amendment that would have added \$2.7 billion for veterans health care – the same amount for health care as recommended by the veterans’ Independent Budget. Unfortunately, this amendment was defeated.

The budget resolution was never adopted by both houses of Congress, and the Senate Appropriations Committee has not completed a VA-HUD appropriations bill for 2005, so there is still uncertainty about the final outcome this year. You can be sure that I will continue to press for funding to deliver the health care our veterans deserve and have earned.

There is no more important priority.

Military Affairs Update

While our fight continues for veterans health care funding and other critical priorities, the Senate has already achieved some important victories for military personnel this year:

- **Affordable health coverage for Guard and Reserve members.** Last year, I won passage of major improvements in health care for National Guard and Reserve members and their families. Among the changes: 180 days of TRICARE health coverage after demobilization. This year, the Senate adopted my proposal to offer affordable health coverage to all members of the National Guard and Reserve and their families. The proposal is now under negotiation with the House of Representatives.
- **B-1 Bomber Funding.** The 2005 defense appropriations act, signed into law in August, includes \$22.5 million, added at my request, for modernization of the B-1 bomber fleet. The funding will add two features to the B-1 fleet that were recommended by flight crews serving in Iraq and Afghanistan: a digital communications system and an improved radar for tracking ground targets.
- **Ellsworth Improvements.** In addition to B-1 funding, the Senate is expected to approve funding for several base improvement initiatives at Ellsworth Air Force Base, including a new \$11.8 million Base Operations Center, 75 new base housing units, and improved perimeter security. Earlier, the Senate adopted my amendment to create national centers of excellence for unmanned vehicle technology, and I will be working to establish one such center at Ellsworth.

Fighting the Priority 8 Ban

In January 2002, President Bush announced that no new Priority 8 veterans would be allowed to enroll in the VA health care system. By next year, this decision will have prevented an estimated 522,000 veterans from receiving VA health services. It affects an estimated 3,800 South Dakota veterans.

The Priority 8 classification is given to veterans who earn more than about \$25,200 a year, although the exact number varies by county.

From the beginning, I have urged the President to reverse his decision, but he announced in his 2005 budget proposal that the ban would continue. In July, I joined 33 other senators in calling upon the President to rescind his Priority 8 ban. As we said in our letter, "There are hundreds of thousands of veterans whose expectations are to be eligible for timely, quality VA health care. It is not an unreasonable expectation: they have fulfilled their service to this country, and it is time we met our obligation to them."

I need your input. Please contact me with your thoughts on veterans and military issues.

Contact Tom Daschle

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